"Why Not Have Fun?": Peers Make Sense of an Inclusive High School Program

Srikala Naraian

Abstract
Including students with significant disabilities at the high school level has been a subject of increasing research in recent years. This study explores the experiences of a high school student with significant disabilities, Michael, through the narratives of his peers. Participant observation in the building indicated that Michael remained on the periphery of mainstream school experiences as his peers worked with an institutional narrative that was predicated on normative expectations of all students. Using data from interviews, the article investigates how Michael’s peers made sense of the process of inclusion that was implemented within this building. It documents the practical constructions of students as they used various elements of the normative discourse within the building to fashion their own interpretations of significant disability. These candid student commentaries retained a persistent focus on the extent to which Michael’s program addressed (or failed to address) his fun-loving disposition while remaining critical of the rationale behind the practices it supported. As the data showed, peers’ notions of fun for Michael were deeply intertwined with the opportunities for participation made available to him and the critical necessity for social interaction with his peers.

DOI: 10.1352/1934-9556-48.1.14

Classrooms aren’t really in a sense a democracy, they are a dictatorship...but it’s kind of up to the teacher whether or not it can be a fun class, you know. I think a lot of times students respond better to teachers that make class more enjoyable. There are teachers that come in the morning, and they view this as their job and they have to do this. It’s kind of like the same way that students look at school. They don’t want to be here. And the teacher who wants to be here and enjoys their job, I think students will have more fun with that teacher. (Drake [note: all names have been changed], a student at Truman High School)

The growing interest in creating small high school communities (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Ort-Wichterle, 2002) might well be considered an attempt to restore some portion of the element of “fun” within the vast, impersonal, and disconnected systems of relations that constitute many high schools today. Viewing high schools as communities rather than as organizations can alter interpersonal relationships in schools, diminishing the sense of isolation that engulfs students (Sergiovanni, 1994; Sizer & Sizer, 1999). Drake’s insight into the nature of teacher–student engagement within the high school classroom may be perceived as an involuntary reflection of the larger bureaucratic system that spawns particular kinds of relations between teachers and students—strained and superficial.

Yet, of greater interest is Drake’s apparent conflation of student engagement with the notion of fun. Fun, Drake appears to suggest, is a form of participation that also requires a purposeful commitment on the part of the adults. This concept of student learning surfaced with surprising regularity in the perceptions of high school students as they pondered the inclusive program that had been designed for a 10th-grade student with significant disabilities, Michael. As I show in this article, peer student narratives of Michael’s experiences at this high school were intertwined with a persistent focus on the extent to which an important condition of learning identified by Drake—the availability of fun—was met or not met. Michael, it seemed, was not having enough fun in school, and the adults
who designed his program seemed unaware of its implications for his learning.

**Background of the Study**

The research described in this paper was a part of a larger study that included two separate sites—an elementary setting and a secondary school setting. The objective within each setting was to investigate the experiences of students with significant disabilities within inclusive classrooms. The relevance of this effort stems from the growing body of research that has testified to the pivotal role of relationships in the lives of individuals with significant disabilities (P. M. Ferguson 2003; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001). The successful participation of these individuals in mainstream living is premised on shared experiences with social partners that afford opportunities for collective meaning-making. If the proffered rationale for including students with significant disabilities in general education settings presupposes the generation of alternate interpretations of disability, how are these peer students making sense of this process?

Data were gathered through participant observation coupled with interviews of teachers, staff, and families (for a detailed analysis of the first-grade setting, see Naraian, 2008). In addition, at the high school, 21 peer students were interviewed. This article is based on the data collected at the high school from February to May 2006. The data from both sites suggested that peer-student narratives of significant disability were inextricably entangled with the larger paradigmatic narratives that prevailed within each setting (Naraian, 2008a). Although the family narrative within the elementary classroom permitted peers to engage in a variety of ways with the student with significant disabilities, the normative paradigmatic narrative at the high school severely constrained the relations of peer students with Michael, the 10th-grade student with significant disabilities (Naraian, 2008a, 2008b). I argued that such a normative narrative, which was premised on maintaining impersonal and uniform systems of learning, where proficiency in tests remained the final arbitrator of student performance, offered few tools for peers to envision other forms of participation for Michael. Few students articulated descriptions of Michael that countered stereotypical assumptions of inability and dependence.

Submerged in the stories of these peers, however, are still other themes. In this article, I attempt to unearth some of those themes and, in that process, acquire a deeper understanding of how peers used their configuration of the world of “high school” to offer a commentary on the program developed for Michael by his teachers. Therefore, even as I continue to acknowledge the constraining role of the institutional narrative within the setting, my goal is to document the practical constructions of students as they used various elements of such a narrative to fashion their own interpretations of significant disability. Such a project values the agentic role of these students by acknowledging and attaching significance to their improvisational acts rather than envisioning them as either resisting or complying with larger cultural discourses (Holland, Lachiotte, Cain, & Skinner, 1998).

What were the ways in which students engaged with the themes within the institutional narrative in relation to Michael? To what extent did such engagement correlate with adult manipulation of similar themes? Investigating the meanings that emerged from these high school students’ narratives can deepen our understanding of the interconnectedness of student identities, cultural practices, and experiences of peers with significant disabilities as well as offer some assistance in evaluating the affordances of a context for the disruption of automated ways of relating to students with significant disabilities.

**Conceptual Framework for the Study**

Including students with significant disabilities at the high school level has been a subject of increasing research in recent years (Bauer & Brown, 2001; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Jorgensen, 1998). Over the last decade, the importance of building relations with nondisabled peers and creating access to the general education curriculum have emerged as two important strands in current research on education for students with significant disabilities (Browder & Spooner, 2006; Carter & Hughes, 2005; Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Kennedy, 2004). Peer perceptions of students with significant disabilities in high school have received some attention within this body of work. In a survey of high school students who were not disabled, Helmstetter, Peck, and Giangreco (1994) found that peers of students with moderate and severe...
Peer stories of high school inclusion

S. Naraian

Disabilities were much more likely to report increased positive outcomes when they had participated in “substantial contact” (p. 274) such as tutoring, helping, or natural friendships. This corroborated the findings of the ethnographic study by Murray-Seegert (1989) in which she studied the relations between students with significant disabilities and their high school peers, many of whom served as teacher assistants within special education classrooms. Categorizing their relations into several types, she argued that such relations embodied a complexity that extended beyond helping roles. More recently, Copeland et al. (2004) used focus-group interviews to examine the perspectives of high school students in a peer buddy program, who provided ongoing support to their peers with moderate and severe disabilities in the building. Many of the themes that emerged from peer assessment of the capacity of high school settings to facilitate integration of students with significant disabilities resonated with the issues raised by Michael’s peers in this study.

Even as I draw on this cumulative body of work, my approach is situated within the tradition of disability studies in education that has emerged in the last decade from the field of disability studies itself (Brantlinger, 2004; Danforth & Gabel, 2006; Reid, 2004). The emphasis on qualitative, interpretive research to describe and understand the lived experience of disability inherent in this tradition is well suited to draw out the voices that have traditionally been underprivileged and, consequently, relatively unheard: for example, families and individuals with disabilities (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). The philosophy of the disability rights movement that underpins this tradition has stimulated scholarly work that shuns conceptualizations of disability as innate and seeks instead to investigate the meanings of disability that are constructed in the interactions of individuals with institutions in society (Pfeiffer, 2003). The tradition of disability studies in education (DSE) is unequivocally committed to the inclusion of all individuals with disabilities into mainstream life and society.

Recent scholarship within this tradition in the field of significant disability has opened up new directions in research even as it stays firmly committed to inclusive settings (Kliwer et al., 2004; Schnorr, 1990). In my research, I seek to build on such work and, in doing so, scrutinize the capacities of the social environments in which students with significant disabilities are embedded. Although such a position does not diminish the rigorous and systematic work that is entailed in bringing about the successful participation of individuals with significant disabilities, it does afford a distinct place for the sense-making activities in which individuals within inclusive environments are necessarily engaged (O’Brien & O’Brien, 2001). What are the meanings of disability that are both individually and collectively being developed within this setting?

Bruner’s (1988, 1990) invaluable guidance regarding the role of narrative in human development has strongly influenced the design of this study. Building on the idea that narrative is one mode by which people organize their encounters with the environment, Bruner emphasized that characters in narrative are inseparably connected to their setting. Narrative inquiry, he noted, does not imply a rejection of causal explanations nor is it “anti-empirical, anti-experimental, or even anti-quantitative” (Bruner, 1996, p. 113). Narrative inquiry means recognizing that the power of explanation is mediated by the three elements, which he identified as integral to the process of making sense: perspective, discourse, and context. How did Michael’s peers understand him in relation to themselves? Participant observation in the building clearly revealed the normative discourse that engulfed these students’ school experiences. The interviews with students, however, were designed to elicit descriptions of Michael without presenting him as member of a generic “disability” category but as a peer participant within shared classrooms. I sought to provoke these students’ engagement with multiple cultural discourses and hypothesize possible scenarios of participation for Michael. Bruner’s concept of a “good story” is characterized by the quality of subjunctivity—the story must be open ended to allow the possibility of multiple meanings. By deliberately embedding this feature within the space provided by the research interviews, I tried to elicit powerful stories from these students.

Method

Located in the suburbs of a large metropolitan area in the Midwest, Truman High School serves at least four unincorporated communities that constituted a predominantly working-class region. The selection of this school could be described as
purposeful sampling or criterion-based selection. Maxwell (1996) described this as “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can't be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 70). The specific criterion required by the design of the study was the inclusion within secondary general education settings of a student with significant disabilities. I use the term students with significant disabilities to refer to students who are labeled within school systems in the United States as having mental retardation, autism, multiple disabilities, and developmental disabilities.

Michael was described by his teachers as “severely disabled.” A wheelchair user, who was also considered “visually impaired,” he used a few words that could be readily understood by the support staff. He did not use any formal means of augmentative communication. Most conversations with Michael were derived from the generous smiles and laughs that he extended to his social partners, particularly those with whom he shared extended periods of time at school, (i.e., support staff). Michael was accompanied by a paraprofessional in all his classes, with one woman (Ms. Jackson) assuming the significant part of that assignment. Others filled in when she was on break or on sick leave.

Prior to my arrival at the high school for data collection in early February 2005, a letter explaining the purpose and scope of my study had been sent to the homes of all the students in the classrooms that Michael attended. During February, March, and April, I visited the school almost every day. By May, these visits had tapered down to 2–3 times a week. I completed data collection about 2 weeks before the school year ended during the first week of June. Sources of data included field notes from participant observation, interviews with Michael’s peers, and interviews with key staff members and his family. On the participant-observer continuum, I was much more of an observer than a participant in these high school classrooms (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). After 4–5 weeks (2–3 hr each day) of participant observation in the building, students from both the general education and special education classrooms that Michael attended were selected to participate in interviews. Participant observation continued during the selection process and as I waited for students to return the signed consent forms.

Initial criteria for such selection included proximity to Michael in class, frequency of encounters in the classroom, joint participation in school or classroom events, and shared history of school settings (attended the same middle or elementary school). During the course of participant observation in this setting, however, not a single general education student interacted with Michael, other than an occasional casual greeting. Furthermore, the structures of participation offered to all students within these classrooms did not include collaborative work. So criteria based on relations with him had to be abandoned. Michael’s paraprofessional offered few leads in this regard.

Overall, selection of students was determined by my observations within the classrooms. I attempted to balance the sample to the greatest extent possible in terms of gender and level of participation demonstrated in class. At least 2 students did not return consent forms signed by their parents or guardians and had to be removed from the sample. Eventually, 21 students who were Michael’s classmates during this semester participated in direct, tape-recorded, open-ended interviews with me. These interviews with students were conducted both individually and in groups. These groups consisted of 3–4 students, often drawn from different classrooms. All interviews lasted about 20–25 min and were conducted in the school library during the “academic networking period” (a block of time when students were expected to work collaboratively with teachers and with other students to complete tests, make up incomplete work, implement joint projects, and other academic pursuits). For 2 of the students, I followed up with individual interviews. Nineteen students were selected from general education classrooms, with 2 students identified as receiving special education services.

Among school staff, the special education teacher, 1 general education teacher, and the chairperson of the special education department were interviewed once during the study. All teacher interviews lasted between 40 and 60 min. I had hoped to interview several more teachers in the high school building. However, given the unvarying nature of Michael’s participation in almost all the classrooms that he attended and the lack of diversity in the instructional practices observed in these classrooms, I did not believe that interviewing other teachers would have added significantly to the data that I had collected through participant observation in that setting.

Detailed field notes were maintained throughout the study, and all interviews were transcribed.
Peer stories of high school inclusion

S. Naraian

verbatim. Data collected through participant observations and interviews yielded more than 300 pages of data, which were subject to coding procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). In sharp contrast to the rich interactive moments documented in the elementary setting that constituted the preceding site in the same study, the field accounts of Michael's high school setting were distinctly “thinner,” reflecting the silent classrooms dominated by uninterrupted lectures and presentations (Naraian, 2008). Initial breakdown of interview data generated broad categories derived from research questions that, on further analysis, revealed several themes. These themes were contextualized with the field notes to generate an institutional normative narrative enacted through school policies and within teacher–student and student–student relations (Naraian, 2009). A further round of inductive coding subsequently generated the concepts that came to constitute the basis of this article.

Notably missing in this article are the voices of Michael's family—his parents and his sister, who was a senior in the same high school. It would be outside the scope of this article to examine their relations with the school, the special education teachers, and, in particular, the paraprofessional, Ms. Jackson. The latter, it must be added, served as their only buffer against a special education system that seemed to operate with goals and purposes that were both puzzling and contrary to their expectations. Although their stories undoubtedly added depth and complexity to the overall findings, they have not been included within this article, which remains focused on the voices of his peers.

Inside Truman High School: Michael's Program

As one of two significantly disabled students in the building, Michael was included in three general education classrooms—world history, foods, and aerobics. Block scheduling in the school meant that students attended four 90-min periods during the day. In the general education classes that Michael attended, such blocks of time were consumed by unbroken lectures punctuated by PowerPoint presentations or hour-long video clips followed by text-based written assignments. The benefits of block scheduling for students with and without disabilities that are discussed in the literature on school restructuring for inclusive education were conspicuously absent in this building (Jorgensen, 1998). It was not uncommon to see students displaying signs of disengagement—heads resting on desks, eyes closed, playing with make-up, or sometimes asleep. Teachers, if they were aware of such disengagement, did not always attempt to address it. Frequently, such behavior was simply ignored. Although some special education teachers co-taught with their general education counterparts in the building, the classrooms attended by Michael did not systematically use this model.

In the world history class, Michael (usually the last to enter the room) was stationed near the door. This meant that he was visible to one half of the classroom (the section seated opposite him) and not the other. During the 90-min block of time, he joined his classmates in assuming the role of a silent participant. There was no indication that he found the lecture meaningful in any way. He might idly flip the pages of the textbook placed on his lap, but throughout the period he remained steadfastly upright, looking into the distance, and demonstrating little reaction to the classroom environment. Occasionally, he might seek to relieve the monotony by stretching out his arm and placing it on the shoulder of his assistant (usually Ms. Jackson), who smiled at him indulgently. For the most part, however, neither the activity introduced by the assistant (scribbling with markers on a dry-erase board) nor the unbroken nature of the lecture taking place seemed to engage Michael sufficiently. There was little evidence either in his facial expression or his body movements to suggest otherwise. The following excerpt from my notes describes an event that repeated itself unvaryingly during the course of the study.

Michael was sitting in his chair angled to Ms. Jackson's right so that though he was not directly facing her, he could look easily into her face. During the lecture, Ms. Jackson seemed engrossed in the same activity as other students—completing the study guide issued by the teacher. Michael followed her actions closely. Occasionally, he would take the pen from her and try to use it on the paper. She admonished him once, "No, put it down." At one point, he leaned forward and then turned his head so that it was thrust directly in front of her face. His eyes were crinkled into what I had come to recognize as a sign of amusement, while his lower lip was puckered in the beginnings of a smile. Ms. Jackson appeared to barely notice this intrusion into her visual field. He did it two or three times during the span of five or ten minutes. On two of those occasions, he put his arm out and rested it on her shoulder. He stroked her hair and toyed lightly with her ear. On another occasion, putting his arm around her neck, he appeared to draw her closer. She looked directly into his face, unperturbed, and said something inaudible to him. She seemed
to be accustomed to this form of display from Michael. He remained in this position for several comfortable moments.

Michael’s physical and metaphorical location in the classroom did not differ in the foods room. He was positioned at the table close to the door. The nature of Michael’s participation remained similar to the history class. As the rest of the class watched a video/film, he too remained stationary at his table. If students were given a test, Ms. Jackson left the room with Michael. If the teacher, Mrs. Wilson, informed her that no other activities were scheduled for the class that morning, she would not return. (During such times, Michael could be observed idling in his chair either in the hallway or in the special education office.) When students worked on assignments drawn from their texts, he sat patiently by Ms. Jackson as she too worked on the same task, waiting to be asked by her to stamp his name on her paper. “Lab” experiences offered greater room for participation, though even during these occasions, Michael remained under the direct supervision of his aide, with minimal interaction with his peers.

Michael and another male special education student were the only boys in the all-girls aerobics class in which he had been enrolled. Michael was frequently, though not always, removed from his chair and placed on the floor during this period. Ms. Jackson, his regular aide, if she was present, physically put him through some of the actions depicted on the screen. Michael, often found this exercise hugely entertaining. He would break out into short bursts of laughter as Ms. Jackson kept directing him to perform an action, which he repeatedly failed to demonstrate satisfactorily. Other than one senior girl who (as I found out later) also received special education services, none of the other students in this classroom engaged with either Michael or Ms. Jackson. As more than one student sheepishly pointed out to me, they did not know who he was when I mentioned his name.

Other than these three general education classrooms, Michael spent at least three blocks in classrooms designed and implemented by special education teachers. His participation varied significantly in these rooms. There were fewer numbers of students in these classes (approximately 10 or 12). Students might be seated in groups or at separate tables or chair desks. Even if their desks were grouped together, the activities themselves were not designed for them to work in groups. The work was still largely independently accomplished. There were longer verbal exchanges between students and teachers in these classrooms. Students talked and joked freely and without fear of reprisal. Even if they were reprimanded, they did not seem to take it very seriously. Students were expected to take part in discussions and were offered time and encouragement to do so. To the extent that Michael’s location placed him intentionally in the midst of the other students, Michael’s experiences here were in sharp contrast to those in other general education classrooms. However, to the extent that the nature of the activity itself in which he was engaged offered few avenues of participation (he was observed coloring with crayons or gazing aimlessly at large colorful books intended for a preschool audience), the significance of that location was diminished. He did not actively work with any of the other students.

Managing Participation: Peer Perceptions of Michael’s Program

During the interviews, students were actively encouraged to describe their own experiences with Michael as well as to conjure alternate forms of participation for him. In doing so, students delivered a surprisingly candid and critical assessment of the program that had been designed for Michael. Perhaps their own social distance from Michael (after all, none of the students who were interviewed could be described as a consistent social partner) offered an unhampered view of adult work in relation to him; or, perhaps, the impersonal context of the high school where teachers frequently remained distant figures of authority laid bare their generic roles with greater clarity (Sergiovanni, 1994). Whatever the impetus for their analytical focus, students were candid about the roles adults played in Michael’s school experiences and implicitly critiqued their attempts to secure an important goal for him—membership within the building. The responsibility of the adults in arranging such opportunities for participation remained unquestioned. Such responsibility, they seemed to suggest, could not be obscured by Michael’s innate capacities to manage such participation.

Results

“Funny, Joyful, Smart!”: Michael and the Discourse of Play

Michael’s good-humored disposition remained a constant theme in these interviews. Michael was
described by his peers as “funny,” “joyful,” enjoying different forms of “play,” “mischievous,” and one who “laughs and smiles a lot.” It was fun to interact with him because “he interacts back.” His peers seemed to readily recognize that Michael was a “happy boy.” Their commentaries on his current structures of participation and the scenarios that they hypothesized for him appeared to coalesce around their perception of his willingness to participate in fun. Jared, a special education classmate, who seemed to have more frequent interactions with him, noted that Michael was “always having fun in every one of his classes that we are in with him.” Michael endeared himself to his peers through his ability to induce laughter. Arianna, a senior, observed:

He makes me laugh (laughing). When he laughs, I laugh. And he doesn’t even have to laugh at anything. He’ll just start laughing and I’ll be like “O my god, that’s so cute.”

His peers could not help but appreciate his sense of humor and the streak of mischief that induced him to play tricks on his paraprofessional, Ms. Jackson. Some students even “normalized” this, suggesting that “everybody does that sometimes, that’s just his way” (Sadie, a junior in foods class). It framed other behaviors that he sometimes displayed in the classroom, such as trying to get away from his aide or when “he’ll try to go mess with something.” Jenna, a junior, reported:

We were doing this one video, I don’t remember which one it was, but we had to do something with our arms. And he was out of his chair, sitting on the ground trying to do this thing and she [Ms. Jackson] was like “No you are doing it wrong” and he started laughing and doing it wrong on purpose. It was really cute. It was funny.

A first reading of the term cute, used especially by the girls and infrequently by the boys, suggests a diminutive characterization of Michael. Was his personality abridged to the only dimension immediately available for viewing by others—child-like play? Yet, as Melanie’s words below illustrate, perhaps this focus on play did not necessarily imply the kind of infantilizing discourse that it might initially suggest. Melanie, a junior in the world history class described an event in class:

Like in class last week, it was a couple of weeks ago, he pushed a chair over and it was just funny…it was good to see him being happy about something and he just started cracking up. So the whole class was laughing, and we were all laughing with him. He was all happy about it, it was really cute.

“It was good to see him…” these students were excited about sharing a moment of sheer fun with Michael especially because they had so little opportunity to get to know him in any other way. Michael in that moment might actually have been deeply humanized. It was Michael at play in the sense of “having fun,” and perhaps that resonated strongly with these students, confined as they were to these tightly structured classrooms. Therefore, cute might well have reflected an appreciation of Michael’s buoyant effect on others. Steeped in the normative discourse of the school, their own linguistic tools may well have constrained their abilities to describe him in other ways.

Michael, it seemed, was ready to engage with others in play and frequently designed his own system to do so. Jared, a special education student, said:

Yeah…he’s always teasing me…He has a thing where I always sit down and he will be, like, “UP!” So I’ll stand up and then he’ll go “DOWN!” [and] he’ll make me sit back down. And he always does that to me, or if I am sitting at a desk, he’ll be like “Down!” and then I’ll have to stand up and then he’ll make me get down and ….

Jared clearly ascribed such play as originating from Michael, even as he willingly (and almost reflexively) participated in it. Regardless of the limited nature of the play that characterized Michael’s engagement with others (throwing a ball, “juggling ducks,” or playing with water bottles were some of the other games that students described), it became the sole means by which others could acquire a glimmer of his personality.

If play, then, was necessary to get to know Michael, it might be because it was an important avenue for self-expression. Melanie, a peer in his world history class observed:

Like, he’ll play with her [Ms. Jackson’s] name tag, and he’ll take it off of her and sometimes, she’ll just tell him to stop or she’ll push him away. But I think that’s a way of expression for him, and [it] makes me feel bad when she pushes him away, coz he’s just trying to play with her.

Melanie’s interpretation of Michael’s play differs from the immediate evaluation of its appropriateness that seemed evident in Ms. Jackson’s actions. Melanie seemed less concerned about the possible inappropriate nature of his “play” and more troubled by the discouraging message of rejection inherent in Ms. Jackson’s response. Melanie extrapolated from such playful actions that Michael in fact, had other strong capacities.
He was “really good at communicating” and “really intelligent.” She was convinced “that he still knows what friendships and relationships are, coz he has his different moods with different people … that’s really cool.”

Brief and sporadic, Michael’s perceived participation in these events of play served as a foil to the restrictive nature of his programming. It was not surprising that including this element in his educational experiences became an important objective for his peers. Ricky, a senior and a teacher cadet in the special education class, remarked:

One thing I have noticed is basically he likes to have fun. So I would say if you were in a classroom, make it fun for him. He laughs a lot. So I would just say make it fun somehow or another.

The importance of these descriptions of Michael as fun-loving and funny emerges in the light of the emphases on independence and normalcy that pervaded these student interviews. It also became steadily apparent that student appropriation of these larger cultural norms reflected goals that diverged from those of Michael’s educators.

“Make Him Feel Normal:” Locating Michael Within the Discourse of “Normalcy”

The infantilization of Michael by his teachers was a recurring theme that emerged within student reactions to his program. There was an overwhelming perception that somehow Michael was being made to appear more helpless and needy than he actually might have been. Such infantilization was couched within the values of independence and normalcy that dominated their responses. Chantal was one of the students who commented on the difference that his positioning in the classroom made to his image.

Chantal: Today I really liked how she [Ms. Jackson] let him sit in a desk. I liked that because that really let him be more into the class and stuff.

Bill: Make him feel more normal.

Chantal: Yeah…instead of just sitting in his chair on the side or whatever,…he always sits off to the side.

Melanie, while corroborating the importance of his positioning in the classroom, speculated on a more purposeful role for Ms. Jackson, one that would require that she “presumes his competence” (Biklen & Burke, 2006), an approach that clearly did not characterize her current relations with him. Melanie mused:

I’d like to see him in the middle of the class, in on the action a little bit more. And be able to work with us and stuff. It would be cooler to see her [Ms. Jackson] instead of just doing stuff for him to explain it to him and tell him what’s going on a little bit more, even though he might not understand it. [It] would be cool to see her communicate with him more, to let him know what’s going on.

Ms. Jackson’s well-intentioned practice of completing the written tasks assigned to other students as a means of representing Michael’s membership in the classroom (he would be asked to stamp his name on the final product) did not appear to have achieved its intended effect. In fact, according to Melanie, her actions seemed to obscure Michael’s innate capabilities and restrict his participation. Other students, however, were less generous in their comments, perceiving Ms. Jackson as unduly interfering. Her relations with him cemented the very notions of deficiency that she might, ironically, have sought to counter. Janice, a senior, from his foods class, complained:

His teacher [Ms. Jackson, the paraprofessional] in our class cooks in Michael’s place, she does all his work. I think that he would probably have a lot more fun and be more independent, if he had to do it by himself and he knew he had to do it by himself. That he couldn’t depend on somebody to do it for him all the time.

Janice seemed to be expressing outrage not only at the unnecessary over-involvement of the paraprofessional but at the practice of fostering dependency that was violating an important norm of which Michael was probably not even aware. Moreover, independence was fun and Michael had to be educated about this. She remained critical of the restrictions imposed by the paraprofessional on Michael, such as being prohibited from “rolling” around the classroom (she saw this as analogous to students walking around the room) and suggested that he should, like others, have his own desk and receive assistance from a classmate who would help him carry out his tasks. Janice’s outrage at Ms. Jackson’s practice seemed to echo, albeit less generously, Melanie’s earlier appeal that she should expect more from him. As Janice stated:

I have a good relationship with all my teachers, but they don’t do my work for me. I mean if I have a question they’ll help me answer it or they will tell me where to find the answer, but they don’t give me the answer. And that’s what Michael is getting. He is just getting the answer, you know. He’s not getting help.

Giving him the answer was not “helping” him. Both Janice and Melanie seemed, in their respective ways, to be demanding that Michael’s agency be allowed to emerge, rather than be suffocated.
with the kind of immoderate assistance that he seemed to be receiving from Ms. Jackson. Although Ms. Jackson certainly may not have been overly concerned about requiring independence from him, she also did not engage in the kind of intricate social work that could be supportive of his expressions of agency (Rossetti, Ashby, Arndt, Chadwick, & Kasahara, 2008). However, for some other students, independence was valued not only for its normative status; it was a means to achieve self-expression. Smothered by the preemptive or protective actions of his teachers, Michael required instead an opportunity to articulate himself. Chantal and Bill, from his world history class, commented on what changes they would like to see in his program:

Chantal: Just kinda maybe make sure that they let him do things for his own a little bit more. Like, if he want[ed] to write...let him write. If he wants to, you know? Let him be hi[m]self.
Bill: Be more independent.

Even as they sought more liberating opportunities for Michael, they assumed his agentivity and respected his capacity to choose what was best for him. At the heart of much of all this student speculation and commentary seemed to lie a concern with the task of getting to know Michael. In different ways, students were striving to identify the means by which this could seem attainable. Even if unable to clearly articulate this process, they seemed nonetheless certain that current teaching practices competed with this goal. What they already knew of Michael—his appealing, funny self—seemed to remain continuously obscured by the practices that were on display.

"Keeping an Eye on Michael:" Enter the "Voice" of Special Education

As his peers tried to figure out the meanings behind adult actions within Michael’s program, echoes of the “voice” of special education resonated in their statements. Inevitably, this unique discourse both collided with and circumvented the themes of independence, normalcy, and fun that surfaced in these peer interviews. In the following episode, Chantal tried to understand the surprisingly harsh response of Ms. Jackson to Michael’s actions. The teacher in world history, Ms. Hymes, had dropped a book, causing Michael to burst out laughing. Despite Ms. Jackson’s admonishment to stop, he continued to do so. Chantal described the reactions of the class.

Chantal: Shelley [another student in the class] laughed and then Ms. Jackson blew up. She [Shelley] was just laughing along with him and then she [Ms. Jackson] got really mad. She’s like [imitating the authoritative tone of Ms. Jackson] “you don’t laugh unless he laughs” and everybody’s like [in an incredulous voice] “he was laughing.” So we don’t know...we don’t know why she got mad.
Bill: She just felt that it wasn’t an appropriate time. Ms. Jackson felt that he wasn’t supposed to throw the book on the floor and they [were] teaching him that it is OK to do it, by laughing at it. He may think it is funny but he is not funny to her...she’s got to deal with it.

However, Chantal was not easily convinced. Despite the efforts of her peer, Bill, to explain the paraprofessional’s response, she remained comprehending of the disproportionate nature of her response.

Chantal: She [Ms. Jackson] really misunderstood the way she [Shelley] was laughing, she really did misunderstand, because she wasn’t really laughing at him or anything, she was kind of laughing with him.

If social recognition by peers was a desired outcome of Michael’s inclusive program, how could Ms. Jackson’s annoyance be explained? Her response rejected Michael’s play as well as the fun experienced collectively by the class in that moment. Drawing on a range of ethnographic accounts of schooling, Woods (1990) suggested that humor plays an integral component in the process of coping with school for students. He pointed out that such instances of humor have much to do with “their own personal development, with experimenting with identities and with the social formation of the groups to which they belong” (p. 194). Michael’s laughter may be seen as an intentional expression of his identity and, in recognizing it as such, his peers acknowledged their collective affiliation to this classroom.

Bill’s comment to mediate Chantal’s indignant reaction, however, bespoke a familiarity with the language and practice of special education professionals. Interestingly, Bill volunteered a little later that his sister was “handicapped” and worked in a sheltered workshop (a site designed for the employment primarily of workers with disabilities), an option that is increasingly being superseded by supported employment models that embed workers with disabilities in mainstream occupational sites (O’Brien & O’Brien, 2002). It would not be farfetched to presume that Bill had had access to the workings of special education through his relations with his sister and that his attempt to
explain Ms. Jackson’s behavior was partially informed by his appropriation of its core tenets.

This determination of behavior as appropriate or inappropriate seemed to preoccupy several students. After Melanie had commented regretfully on Ms. Jackson’s rejection of Michael’s play with her, Arianna (who received special education services herself) interjected that “she’s trying to teach him something, you know.” Yet, she too, was quick to confess her ambivalence on this emphasis on independence.

Sometimes, he’ll be wheeling himself, [and] she [Ms. Jackson] is like “Alright Michael, I am leaving” and I am like [exaggerated expression of alarm on face]. She’s trying to teach him to move himself and everything. So sometimes I understand, and then sometimes I am like “Oh, I so wouldn’t do that.” Or, I like that he is able to eat himself and they let him, in the cafeteria and stuff, but…I don’t know. Sometimes I just feel bad for him.

Melanie intervened to support Arianna’s statement:

I feel bad for him because some people just automatically judge him as being slow and everything when he is just different from everybody, and if you get to know him, he’s actually really funny and he’s really cool to be around.

Implicit in their musings on Michael was a strange tension between the values of independence that they could certainly appreciate and the likely suppression of his personality of which they were apprehensive. They seemed, in fact, to be questioning the objective of independence that partially informed his educational programming. They implicitly wondered about what real benefits such an emphasis could provide Michael, especially if it came at the cost of diluting his sense of self to others and obscuring the very qualities of being “funny” and “cool” that made him so distinctive. In their exposition on the principle of partial participation, D. L. Ferguson and Baumgart (1991) noted this misguided emphasis on independence by well-intentioned educators, a practice that left students with significant disabilities perpetually waiting to enter mainstream activity. It is interesting that these students, who recognized and acknowledged the value of independence, prioritized his social relations with his peers and, implicitly, his membership in the student community.

Some students had appropriated the “voice” of special education to interpret it as a tool of surveillance. Sadie and Tess were students who shared a table with Michael, Brett (another special education student), and Ms. Jackson during the foods class. All of Michael’s laboratory experiences in foods, too, were conducted within this group. The philosophy of Michael’s educational program, as enacted in the practice of Ms. Jackson, was more immediately available to these students than to others in the classroom. Sadie, a junior in foods, said:

I think he needs somebody, just to make sure he is doing what he is supposed to, instead of just wandering around the school or not getting into any trouble…keep an eye on him.

Michael needed to be supervised and his actions closely monitored. She and others, such as Shaun, who also reported engaging in helping activities with Michael at the elementary school under the aegis of special education professionals, seemed to have developed their own concept of an inclusive model premised on achieving nonacademic ends.

Sadie: They usually don’t put them [students with significant disabilities] in world history, they usually wouldn’t put Michael in those. They put them more in like a foods or gym [class] just coz it is more for the socializing, not really the actual class.

Shaun: Yeah

Michael’s special education teacher would have certainly corroborated their interpretation of his program, even though she might have questioned its adequacy or benefit for him. Still, it was not surprising that their assessment of his learning experiences at the high school centered on expectations of appropriate social behavior.

Shaun: He’s learning to calm down.

Sadie: He is learning to restrain himself.

Shaun: Like we said before, he has made major improvements since elementary so…

Sadie: Yeah. I guess he’s learning to act like better around people.

Unlike Melanie and Arianna, whose expectations of the nature of learning experiences offered to Michael centered on its ability to elicit his authentic, funny self, these students were clearly able to detach their descriptions of Michael as “happy,” “curious,” and “mischiefous” from their expectations of his participation as a student at the high school.

Putting It All Together: Describing Participation for Michael

It was in their earnest attempt to envision other forms of participation for Michael that students appeared to actively blend their own unique understandings of Michael and their configurations...
of the world of high school. Even as some felt that he was treated “like a normal person” and that “they [had] really taken him in, as their own,” many others were vocal about the changes that would be beneficial to Michael. It should be added that even those who were uncritical of the program were still deeply critical of the relational posture adopted by Ms. Jackson toward Michael. Characterizing this as a “mother–child” relation, several students expressed outrage at this unwarranted assumption of authority by one who was not a designated family member. As Chantal pointed out,

I go to school to try and get away from my mom. And I wouldn’t like to have to come to school with somebody who kinda acts like my mom. Like trying to tell me what…all the time, and stuff like that…they get annoying.

Several students did not hesitate to describe Ms. Jackson’s interactional manner with Michael as “mean.” It was in the additional context of these relations that were daily on display that students posed their suggestions.

Drawing Michael into the heart of classroom life emerged as an important concern for his peers, a theme that has been reported in prior research (Bunch & Valeo, 2004). In addition, there was a strong perception that Michael’s current programming offered few means by which he could engage with other students. In other words, inclusion for Michael was currently largely a matter of placement rather than of substantive processes within the general education classroom. Nicole, a senior and teacher cadet in his world history classroom, offered tentatively,

I know he comes in late and leaves early but I think that if he could get there earlier and maybe intertwined with the students…I think that [with] him being in the back of the room…everyone looks up to the front and no one really sees his reactions and how much he really does pay attention and listen and stuff.

Nicole also offered a specific strategy for teachers to “include” Michael more:

Well, like just saying his name…Seems like when he hears his name he knows that he is being talked to…and like how an ordinary teacher will pull out another student and be like “Are you awake, so and so?” It could easily be like “Michael, do you understand that?” or just something as simple as that to include him in the classroom.

The girls in Michael’s aerobics class spoke ruefully about the constraints that both the aerobics class as well as high school survival in general placed on Michael’s participation. As Lorna, a freshman, pointed out,

I think we sort of overlook him because he is a gay. It’s also a mostly all-girl gym class, and we are usually in there watching videos.

Lorna’s regret about the nature of enrollment in this course indexed the carelessness or poor judgment of Michael’s program developers in placing him in an all-girls class. Less generously, it speaks to the potentially emasculative nature of his program, where the intentional association of particular (in)capacities with traditionally gendered activity perpetuates assumptions of weakness and diminishes other forms of contribution (Wong, 2002). Furthermore, there was little opportunity for students to interact with anybody in this class. Lorna offered a telling commentary on the social strategies that became both relevant and necessary to manage the world of high school:

And a lot of us are like really clicky. Like Melissa said, [she], Julia and I just stick together and then there are the athletic people that stick together, the choir people …Then we are in our own little worlds, in our own little section of the aerobics and we don’t interact with really anybody else.

Lorna and her peers were documenting an important condition for success in the high school that had somehow escaped the attention of Michael’s program developers—supportive social networks. Becoming a member of a clique or building different social circles was an important mechanism to combat the vast and impersonal systems of authority that characterized their learning experiences. It was this kind of social network that supported students in negotiating and managing the disconnect that they might experience within classrooms. Furthermore, this form of support seemed to play an important role in enabling them to derive enjoyment from their classes. As Lorna commented:

In my algebra class, everybody hates the class because nobody really likes our teacher. So, that’s not really fun and the only reason we have fun is because the people we end up sitting with…is everybody [who] can get along.

Clearly social interaction, fun, and learning were deeply interwoven in their assessment of high school experience. They readily identified such social engagement as necessary for Michael, too, at the high school. They seemed certain that the classes which promoted such forms of social interaction would be the most suitable for him.
Rejecting algebra on these grounds, Melissa spoke more enthusiastically about her English class:

But like in English class, I think that’d be fun because we face each other and we talk a lot. We discuss. And we are [inaudible] close, we sit together at lunch and everything. I think it would be more fun to put him in that type of class then a class that’s really focused on hard [content].

Other students, without foregrounding the importance of social interaction, nevertheless assumed it as they speculated on other forms of participation in which he might engage. Vivian, a quiet student in the aerobics class, commented on Michael’s ability to play a caretaking role, similar to what she did for her own little sister:

I could see him helping other people a lot, even if it’s just coming into the room and you know, just being there. He can help anybody. He’s just got that type of characteristic where he can just help someone.

She was less forthcoming about sharing more details about some of these scenarios, but it was clear that she harbored some strong views about adult implementation of Michael’s program.

They don’t really keep him with everybody, they keep him with everybody for about 30 minutes and they take him out of the class.

Sometimes they just leave him out in the hallway, coz there’s no students allowed in that little thing there [the teachers’ office]. So the teachers are in there, and him and Cara [another student with significant disabilities in the building] will be across the hallway and just sitting there.

The intentional or incidental separation of Michael (and Cara) from the mainstream student body was not only inexplicable but unjustifiable given that such separation resulted in making their isolation absolute.

Melanie and Nicole speculated on avenues of participation that situated Michael squarely in the middle of the high school experience. Nicole’s suggestion that he could participate in the fashion show was premised on the enjoyment that he derived from being with others, how “he would enjoy seeing everyone clapping” as well as the conviction that everyone else would think it was “awesome” too. Melanie expressed excitement in the possibility of including Michael in drama, because “whether he is able to communicate... whether he is able to physically tell us...what he thinks about it or whatever, you know that he is going to be able to communicate what he thought about it;” and, most important, “it would be cool to see his feedback on it.” Noting that she herself fared poorly in memorizing lines and, therefore, preferred silent roles, she assumed that this form of participation might serve Michael as well. Kevin, a junior in Michael’s world history class, suggested that Michael could be trained to be a cashier at a drugstore. His peers during the interview, however, were reluctant to share that vision.

Inevitably, there were suggestions of a more limited form of participation for Michael, which, however, could still be fun for him. Whereas Julia speculated that Michael’s participation at the zoo or a pet store might simply mean petting the animals and enjoying their presence, Arianna, unlike Melanie speculated that Michael’s role in a drama class might involve watching plays with the rest of the group. Jenna commented that he “could dance to have fun, but not to be a dancer.” Ricky offered that Michael might enjoy watching a baseball game, “to sit and cheer,” or perhaps help out the coach (he was unable to offer a more detailed vision of what this last option might entail). Janice was certain that he would not be able to take a photography class but suggested that an art class that used finger painting might be more enjoyable for Michael.

Discussion

Competing Visions of Normalcy

Michael’s program of inclusion was not initiated by his teachers but, as has been reported all too often in family narratives, implemented through the perseverance of his parents who vigilantly monitored its continuation through the years. Certainly, according to them and his paraprofessional (who had served in this capacity for more than 5 years at the time of the study), the process had received the support of the staff at both the elementary and middle schools. No doubt the overall administrative perception of his program at the high school was that it was supported in this building as well.

Yet, individual interviews with special and general education staff in the building clearly revealed a layer of hostility to the concept of “full inclusion” that was used to describe Michael’s programming. Full inclusion refers to the practice of including all students with disabilities in general education classrooms all the time. The term full implicated both the amount of time spent in
Peer stories of high school inclusion

S. Naraian

general education classrooms as well as the entire population of students with disabilities (McMillan, Grisham, & Forness, 1996). The practice has beenparticularly controversial because of its implications for students with significant disabilities. Michael’s special education teacher was deeply resentful that her professional assessment of the benefits of such programming for Michael had to be subordinated to what she perceived was an ideological stance adopted by his parents. She did not hesitate to share her vision of normalcy:

I think we have to weigh the numbers—if there [are] 25 students in the class, maybe this is good for the one but if it’s detrimental to 24 others, why are we just singling out the one? We are throwing the other 24 out for this one. If there were kids drowning in a lake and I walked up to it, and there [was] a bunch throwing the other 24 out for this one. If there were kids to 24 others, why are we just singling out the one? We are in the class, maybe this is good for the one but if it's detrimental I think we have to weigh the numbers—if there [are] 25 students not hesitate to share her vision of normalcy:

Interwoven with this vision of normalcy was her commitment to the values of a separate, “functional” curriculum for students with significant disabilities like Michael, preferably conducted within a separate, specially designed location that would provide them with the skills for “normal,” everyday living. The functional approach to curriculum emerged in the wake of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) to promote access to the community by targeting skills of daily living (Browder & Spooner, 2006). D. L. Ferguson (1987) and Shapiro-Barnard (1998) have argued that the use of such a functional curriculum, more specifically, one that minutely addresses activities of daily living, is not premised on a strong rationale of learning. It presumed that the kinds of learning that occurred within the general classrooms were unnecessary to students with significant disabilities. Although this approach was certainly an advancement over the earlier developmental approach, the functional model also carried the inherent risk that the education for students with significant disabilities would increasingly become separate from the typical school experience (D. L. Ferguson, 1987). Furthermore, it required educators to make value-based assumptions on future environments for these students.

More recently, in keeping with the standards-based reform agenda supported by the No Child Left Behind Act, the curricular focus has shifted to the alignment of individualized goals to state learning standards for all students. However, despite the concerted focus on creating access to the general curriculum that is evident in the literature, teachers are often ambivalent that such efforts can be meaningful for students with significant disabilities and they are less willing to abandon separate, functional curricula (Agran, Alper, & Wehmeyer, 2002; Wehmeyer & Agran, 2006). Michael’s special education teacher’s frustration in being unable to effectively implement such a functional curriculum in the context of the general education environment and the department’s seeming lack of preparedness in helping Michael access the general education curriculum collectively ensured the virtual absence of meaningful learning activity for him within these classrooms.

Unlike his special education teacher, Michael’s paraprofessional, Ms. Jackson, passionately embraced the concept of inclusion for him and zealously strived to implement it with or without the express guidance of the special education teachers. She was not unappreciative of his unique personality:

I want people to look beyond the fact that he has a disability. And get to know his sense of humor. You know he cracks jokes, you know…not cracks jokes, but he cracks up all the time. He laughs at stuff that’s so funny.

Yet, her own relations with him enacted within the space of the general education classroom articulated a diminished view of significant disability that not only set him on the margin as subject to very different standards of behavior but simultaneously evoked peer hostility to the violation of norms of appropriate relations between students and teachers. Ironically, Ms. Jackson believed that her actions were spurred by her anxiety to promote Michael’s relations with his peers (she vehemently stated, “I am not his mom”) and for Michael to think of himself as independent. Although students with intellectual disabilities have reported the benefits of such paraprofessional loyalty in the face of tough high school contexts, equally valid concerns have been raised about the impediment to genuine inclusive experiences for these students posed by immoderate paraprofessional presence (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005; Giangreco & Broer, 2005).

Ms. Jackson’s good intentions notwithstanding, the discourse on normalcy by special education staff was premised on locating the problem within Michael and requiring his acquiescence to the framework already operant in this building. The discourse on normalcy that emerged from his peers
certainly drew on that same framework but, just as important, was interanimated by values and norms that circulated within other realms of interpretation, including, though not limited to, adolescence. Within this building, therefore, special education’s emphasis on “appropriate” behaviors and its assumption of the valued status of independence obscured the person-within-Michael that ironically seemed clearly visible to some of his peers despite their limited engagement with him. This was partially because they could, to a greater extent than his teachers, evaluate his experiences as a high school student rather than as a student with disabilities in a high school. Melanie’s plea for Ms. Jackson to presume his competence rather than make the assumption that he could not understand emerged from this perspective. Through the lens of play and fun, she and some of her peers were able to perceive him as agentive and even more like themselves—more “normal”—than the parameters of his program envisioned.

Social Interaction, Membership, and High School Success

The framing of Michael by his educational program occurred almost entirely within the parameters of his disability, such that his membership within other communities of practice seems to have been barely considered. This oversight had important implications for the success of the inclusive process. The students within this sample enunciated some common themes that might well have informed their perceptions of Michael’s experiences in this building. Particularly noteworthy among these was their preoccupation with increasing the opportunities for social interaction for Michael. These students identified this as an immediate concern for him, basing it on their own analysis of realizing a successful high school experience.

The importance of social interactions to student learning has been addressed in the literature on the education for students with significant disabilities (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Carter, Hughes, Guth, & Copeland, 2005). However, within the perspective of Michael’s peers, it was more than a contextual variable that influenced his participation. Social engagement, these students seemed to argue, is a condition for learning. Such a view of learning presupposes Michael’s membership within these classrooms. Membership within communities affords the opportunities for the forms of participation that can then be understood as learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Michael’s membership in this school community, however, was tenuous at best. The systematic care, commitment, and patience that characterize the work of schools that are transforming themselves into inclusive communities were not available at Truman High School (Bauer & Brown, 2001; Jorgensen, 1998; Schnorr, 2000). Although the larger administrative structures might have assumed that his position was secure (Michael’s parents confirmed that the school principal was sympathetic to their needs), the absence of engagement with his peers suggested that he remained on the periphery of their experiences in the school. As a prerequisite for achieving membership, his peers were clearly demanding that his program afford him the opportunities that would increase his social interaction with his classmates.

Such social interaction would be fun for Michael. However, this emphasis on fun was more than a meager concept for his peers. Fun, social interaction, and effective participation in the classroom seemed to be subtly intertwined. The opportunity to actively participate in a classroom that presumed avenues for social interaction was itself an occasion for fun. Students seemed to make a distinction between content areas that were simply outside the realm of fun (“It would be hard to make geometry fun”—Jenna) and processes of participation such as working with classmates as being fun because of its relational element. Michael’s good-humored, fun-loving, and happy temperament might well have occasioned their concern for inserting fun into his program. However, it seemed increasingly clear as they ruminated over the questions posed to them during the interviews that this preoccupation reflected an important value in their assessment of schooling and learning in general. Although Drake’s somewhat cocky assertion—“While you are here, why not have fun? I guess my teachers see my enthusiasm and enjoy it”—might signify a more individualistic approach to school success, most of Michael’s peers in this study assigned significant responsibility to the institutional structures to actualize this experience for him.

Conclusion

Underlying the positions of the school staff and the narratives of Michael’s peers lays a quest for the
Peer stories of high school inclusion

S. Naraian

ingredients of a successful inclusive experience for a student with significant disabilities. Yet, this very question presupposes that such experience must be considered separate from the experiences of other students in the building. As Jorgensen (1998) and Bauer and Brown (2001) have clearly illustrated, creating inclusive programs in high schools implies a fundamental restructuring of schools—of teacher and student roles and responsibilities, of school structures that can enhance creative allocation of resource of time and materials, and of relations among various entities within the building. Michael's successful inclusion in the building required a broader conception of learning and school achievement that was unavailable both to him and to his peers.

Yet, even within the confines of the normative framework that prevailed in this high school setting, students were ready to identify the limitations of his program and to speculate on alternate scenarios, with greater affordances for participation for Michael. They were, in fact, critiquing the representation of Michael within this high school context. They recognized implicitly the importance of such representation for his membership within the building. Berube (1998) argued that the task of such representation is an important commitment that families and professionals who advocate for individuals with significant disabilities must take seriously. The continually shifting ground of political and legislative agendas rendered the social location of these individuals vulnerable to the vagaries of public moods and demanded that such representation be vigilantly monitored. Michael's peers clearly sought other, more expansive, and authentic forms of representation of Michael than those generated by his program.

These calls for alternative representations emerged not in their own practice with him but only in the context of the interviews conducted in this study. Holland et al. (1998) suggested that opportunities for agentic improvisations occur when cultural discourses bump up against each other. The normative discourse that prevailed in this setting might have been inscribed in much of the peer interactions with Michael and even in their descriptions of him. Yet, for many students, the deliberate juxtaposition of this discourse with an alternative proposition of “normalcy”—in other words, Michael as a peer high school student—established in the interviews afforded these students the opportunity to articulate visions of him that belied, even contradicted, their actual practice with him. Engineering such improvisational acts in practice that might disrupt automated responses to significant disability would require intentional manipulation of schooling contexts, from unstructured moments in the hallway, cafeteria, or classrooms to the larger structures of participation afforded to all students in the classrooms and school.

For the teachers and staff in this building to undertake such transgressive work first requires a unified commitment to the inclusion of a student with significant disabilities in a high school. Opportunities for enacting such commitment might occur in multiple ways that intersect differentially with individual teacher biographies. However, the kind of systemic approach to such inclusive practice that Jorgensen (1998) and Bauer and Brown (2001) described engages with the broader and more significant task of altering cultural assumptions of ability and achievement that predicate the education of students with disabilities. For Michael in particular, varied, institution-wide, curricular approaches would in all probability have generated many other peer narratives of significant disability. Therefore, even as educators tackle the immense responsibility of restructuring high schools, the insights and comments offered by Michael’s peers afford an intermediary yet valuable guidepost to such efforts: How his peers made sense of his experiences may be an important marker of the effectiveness of his educational programming.

References


Naraian, S. (2008a). I didn’t think I was going to like working with him, but now I really do!”: Examining peer narratives of significant disability. Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 46, 106–119.


Received 6/26/08, first decision 1/27/09, accepted 3/18/09.

Editor-in-Charge: Steven J. Taylor

Authors:
Srikala Naraian, PhD (E-mail: naraian@tc.edu), Assistant Professor, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Teachers College, Columbia University, Box 31, 525 W. 120th St., New York, NY 10027.